Tells the Facts and Names the Names

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Yucca Flat to Geneva:
Keep Nukes Alive!

Next June 18 the soils and rocks of Yucca Flat in the high desert 65 miles northwest of Las Vegas are scheduled to quiver from an explosion 980 feet below the earth's surface. The "subcritical" nuclear weapons test, named Rebound 1, involves a chemical explosion which submits plutonium metal to extremely high temperature and pressure. It is designed to gather data only of interest to weapons designers. Rebound will signal the survival and continuing vitality of the US nuclear weapons research establishment in the laboratories of Los Alamos, Livermore, and Sandia. The government's commitment to nuclear weapons as the ultimate custodian of American security is as strong as ever.

The delicacy with which these important developments are being sidled into public view is exquisite. Since the Department of Energy announced the tests last November, we have been able to locate precisely one item on the subject in the major national newspapers, a brief news clip in *The Chicago Tribune*, relaying the Energy Department's press release. The only useful stories have been in newspapers in Las Vegas and near Livermore, east of San Francisco, which is due to design the second test explosion – Holog 1 – on September 12. Los Alamos is devising Rebound.

The Energy Department announced the two 1996 tests and four more scheduled for 1997 in the midst of public uproar over the French tests in the South Pacific. Later this month, negotiations are scheduled to begin in Geneva on the Comprehensive Test Ban. Rebound will be shaking the seismographs in Yucca Flat at the very moment the talks are scheduled to conclude and Holog will go off in ironic counterpoint to the formal signature of the long-anticipated treaty on the early fall.

Though public discussion of the new test schedule has been minimal within the US, foreign reactions have been strong. Australia's Foreign Minister Garth Evans told reporters on November 3, "The timing of it is unquestionably unhelpful in terms of the CTB negotiations that lie ahead...There is no doubt it *has* complicated the task of negotiating a test ban treaty next year."

Other nations such as Mexico and Austria echo the protests of scientists and arms controllers and groups such as Greenpeace, the Institute for Science and International Security and Western States Legal Foundation, who raise these points:

- The testing program will undermine negotiations in Geneva, and give ammunition to countries such as China and India who pretend to support a test ban while hoping to subvert it.
- As Frank von Hipple, a nuclear physicist and former US government official puts it, "the planned experiments are a verification nightmare", since the experiments are underground and there will be no independent review to ascertain whether the explosions are "zero-yield", as the Energy Department claims, or small yield.
- If the US conducts such experiments, other nations will rightfully claim they should be able to do so as well. For threshold countries like India and Pakistan, "subcritical" testing could yield rich seams of knowledge about how to build a nuclear bomb.
- The tests will keep the Nevada site open, thus ending hopes that a test ban would close it down.

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Punch Bowl

Firm as the bonds have been between House Speaker Newt Gingrich and House Whip Tom DeLay of Texas, cement is now forcing them apart. DeLay is a champion of Cemex, the Mexican giant which for the past six years has faced barriers to the US market because of carping charges that it illegally dumped cement at below-market prices in the US. Last July, DeLay wrote a passionate oped piece for *The Houston Chronicle* in which he said that "Mexico, our close neighbor and North American Free Trade Agreement partner, would like to provide the United States with the cement it needs" but was being hindered by federal bureaucrats. The following month DeLay and Gene Green, another Texas Republican, sent a letter to Commerce Secretary Ron Brown and US Trade Representative Mickey Kantor pressing them to rescind the tariffs imposed on Mexican cement.

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DeLay's fervor was surprising. The company that most heavily lobbied for sanctions against Cemex was Southdown Inc., which hails from DeLay's home state. All becomes clear when one learns that Cemex's top lobbyist in the US is none other than Tom's brother, Randy DeLay. Randy pulls in about $5,000 a month for his efforts on behalf of Cemex.

Unburdened with family conflicts, Gingrich responds only to the sound of the cash register. Pressure from Gingrich a few years back led to the initial sanctions against Cemex, which the DeLay brothers are now working so furiously to overturn.

In the fall of 1989 Gingrich mobilized more than a dozen Republican members of Congress to write letters to the International Trade Commission and to then-Commerce Secretary Robert Mosbacher, demanding that Cemex be penalized. Soon the Commission was ruling that Southdown and other US firms had suffered "material injury" from Cemex exports. Tariffs against Cemex were promptly applied.

And what had rallied Gingrich to Southdown's cause? In September of 1989, Southdown's executive vice president, Edgar Marston III, wrote to Rep. Joe Barton of Texas, the head of that state's chapter of GOPAC, Gingrich's political action committee: "Thanks for interrupting your busy schedule yesterday and visiting with me and my associates regarding our dumping case against Mexican cement producers. I also appreciate your offer of assistance in that matter...As we discussed several months ago, I am enclosing a check for $10,000 payable to GOPAC."

Barton alerted Gingrich to Southdown's generosity, sparking his letter-writing campaign in the company's favor. During the following months a grateful Marston doled out at least $15,000 more to GOPAC.

The Phantom Veto

In our last issue we reported on Senator Christopher Dodd's support for the so-called securities "reform" bill, which protects financial brokers from being prosecuted even if they deliberately mislead investors with false promises about safe high-yield investments. Just after we went to press, President Clinton vetoed the bill; his veto was promptly overturned by both houses of Congress.

The veto was classic Clinton: it allowed him to pose as a consumer champion without the risk of actually challenging Wall Street and other big campaign contributors promoting the "reform" bill.

Opponents of the bill had been assured by White House aides that the veto issued by Clinton would be sharply worded. Instead, the president released a statement saying that it was true that "innocent companies" were being unfairly hit with "frivolous suits", and that if Congress made a few minor modifications he would sign a new bill.

Scenting there would be no real opposition, the House and Senate decided not to make any changes in the bill and easily passed it again over the president's veto. In the words of *The New York Times*, "Mr. Clinton hardly worked vigorously to prevent an override. His calls to senators asking for support were few and feeble."

Cheney's Flag: My Company 'Tis of Thee

Former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney has been quietly supporting President Clinton's deployment of US troops to Bosnia. A Republican staffer in Congress tells us that Cheney recently held a private meeting with a group of GOP senators in which he urged them to rally around the flag.

Last year, Cheney was named boss of Halliburton, the Texas oil and gas company. Halliburton is the parent company of Brown & Root, which has been hired by the Pentagon to provide logistical support for the Bosnia mission. "Wherever American troops go in Bosnia, Brown & Root Inc. will be nearby, digging latrines, erecting tents, laying electrical lines, cooking meals, doing laundry, and serving any other need of the US military", *The Washington Post*'s John Mintz wrote in a December 24 puff piece.

Secretary of State Warren Christopher has said that the entire Bosnian mission will cost $1.5 billion. Our Republican staffer tells us that Brown & Root's contract alone is for that amount. He also wondered why the Pentagon, fatted with a $250 billion budget, wasn't capable of providing logistical support itself. ■

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Give Me Your Tired, Your Huddled PCBs

At a stroke the Clinton administration has torn the guts out of the Toxic Substances Control Act, which banned international trade in hazardous materials. By doing so it has revived a lethal incineration industry that was on its last legs. The big US companies specializing in hazardous waste incineration faced a seemingly inexorable deadline: a falling supply of PCBs as the lethal inventory steadily diminished. All this has now changed.

For fifteen years the US has held an absolute ban on the production and importation of polychlorinated biphenyls –familiarly known as PCBs, an extremely toxic chemical used as an industrial lubricant and as a fire retardant in electric transformers. PCBs have been shown to cause cancer, liver damage and other health disorders. In the Great Lakes region alone, more than 40,000 people may die from eating PCB-laced fish.

But thanks to the North American Free Trade Agreement, Ohio Democrats and the all powerful US Department of Commerce, this supply-side crisis has now been solved. As of November 22, 1995, the United States became a PCB-importing nation. The incinerators will be fed PCBs and spew out even deadlier dioxin, a consequence of burning PCBs.

On that same November day, Ottawa succumbed to US pressure and allowed Canadian firms to start trucking PCB-contaminated materials south to Tallmadge, Ohio. Here the PCBs are extracted from electrical capacitors, placed in 5,000 gallon containers and shipped to an incinerator like WTI's outside Cincinnati.

The US government is now ready to open its southern border to the infinitely more lucrative supply from Mexico, where an estimated 20,000 tons of PCBs are already available and where PCB production is still lawful. The Environmental Protection Agency had scheduled its green light for the Mexican shipments for January 1, though the US government's shut-down has forced a temporary postponement.

For five years the S.D. Myers Company had pleaded with the EPA to grant an exemption from the Toxic Substances Control Act, allowing the company to import PCBs to its Tallmadge "decontamination" plant outside Akron. The EPA consistently denied all such requests, including the most recent one in March of 1995.

At that moment the Ohio congressional delegation led by Senator John Glenn and Congressman Tom Sawyer (both Democrats) went to work on behalf of S.D. Myers, which expected to make nearly $100 million a year from the enterprise. Sawyer and Glenn went directly to Commerce Secretary Ron Brown who speedily convinced EPA director Carol Browner of the error of her ways.

By November of last year S.D. Myers had its waiver. The next task was to overwhelm Canadian resistance. Canadian greens were not eager to see PCBs being trucked around their country and the Canadian government wanted to protect its own PCB disposal industry. The Clinton administration summoned south Canada's minister of the environment, Sheila Copps. She was informed that her government's stance created an unfair barrier to free trade. The Canadian government duly deferred.

Press coverage in the US of these important developments has been even more sparse than in the case of the subcritical nuclear weapons tests discussed on page 1. Not a single story on the end of the PCB ban has appeared in any US newspaper. When **CounterPunch** broke the news to Dr. Paul Connett, a leading PCB expert based at St. Lawrence University, he was thunderstruck, calling the importation of PCBs for incineration "outrageous and dangerous" and predicting it would effectively destroy the Toxic Substances Control Act.

The failing incineration industry has now been given its necessary fuel for years to come, with PCBs only the start. ■

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Tom Clement of Greenpeace says the new tests have three functions. One, they provide make-work for the Nevada corporations under contract to the Energy Department, including Lockheed and Bechtel, thus satisfying the concerns of Nevada's congressional delegation that jobs be maintained. Two, they push the limits of what sorts of testing will be allowed under a test ban treaty. Finally, and most importantly, they preserve the vast establishments at Los Alamos, Livermore and Sandia.

The Energy Department's press kit, served up to angry public interest groups last November, has an earnest evasiveness which is comical: "At most, a few hundred pounds of chemical high explosive will be used"; then – a few pages later – "plans exist for experiments at somewhat higher levels". Yes, "some special nuclear materials, such as plutonium, will be used", but "the materials will never reach criticality" (meaning no self-sustaining nuclear reaction will take place). To ensure "zero yield" there will be "a formal DOE process that uses technical experts who have not been involved in the original design of the experiment",

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although these very experts "will come from DOE weapons laboratories".

Still, as one penetrates the velleities and murk of the press release, the unmistakable outlines of a long-nourished plan to preserve the budgets of the nuclear weapons establishment heaves into view. The tests are part of a larger Energy Department program, initiated during the Clinton administration, known as the Stockpile Stewardship and Management Program. It already costs $3 billion a year and the numbers will go up. The aim is to provide the full functional equivalent of underground testing by detonating conventional explosions which may or may not involve radioactive materials.

The Stockpile Program includes several dozen facilities, some constructed and some proposed. Many of these are enormous, the size of football arenas, and are training grounds for nuclear weapons scientists and designers. The crown jewel is Livermore's National Ignition Facility, projected to cost $4.5 billion over the next several decades. There's also the proposed Advanced Hydrotest Facility, which Bill Quirk, a Livermore nuclear scientist, calls "a weapons designer's dream".

Jackie Cabasso of Oakland's Western States Legal Foundation says the Stockpile Program was a pay-off to the nuclear research laboratories to gain their support for the test ban and also was needed to get the Senate to back the treaty. But as she points out, the Stockpile Program "is completely contrary to any notion of reducing reliance on nuclear weapons, to getting rid of nuclear weapons, to the historic purposes of the CTB". Consequently, the treaty's importance for non-proliferation is greatly diminished.

Raffi Papazian, test director for Los Alamos, is forthright about the research prospects that lie ahead. He has remarked that a lot of basic research about nuclear materials had been scanted because "we were under the gun" during the Manhattan Project, that led to the first nuclear explosion at Alamogordo. Now the laboratories will have all the time they need to explore exciting and hitherto ignored avenues of nuclear weapons research.

Some history from the time when President John Kennedy and Defense Secretary Robert McNamara were trying to ease the 1963 partial nuclear test ban through the US senate. As Deborah Shapely put it in *Promise and Power*, her 1993 biography of McNamara: "The [joint chiefs] did testify for the treaty, because in the locked room they demanded an enormous price: more funding for the weapons labs, preparation to test quickly in case the Soviets violated the agreement and other conditions. The net effect was to strengthen the weapons labs, expand US underground testing, and continue the arms race."

Cabasso says that it is "difficult to overestimate the influence of the nuclear research labs on the proliferation of nuclear weapons and on undermining efforts to limit their testing and production". Back at the start of the 1960s the Livermore lab deliberately stockpiled plutonium above its authorized limit. As then-lab director John Foster put it, "We chose to be ready to test once the ban was lifted...I guess it is an example of the value of a relatively independent laboratory, one that could execute actions at slight variance to the consensus in Washington."

In the Carter era Harold Agnew and Roger Baetzel, directors of Los Alamos and Livermore, each boasted of having talked the president out of a comprehensive test ban. In September of 1992 Robert Barker, deputy associate director of the Livermore Laboratory, told a group of employees, "One of the major jobs this institution has is to help the country realize this legislation (the Nuclear Testing Moratorium Act signed by President Bush) was a mistake."

Thus, potential co-signatories to the test ban being negotiated in Geneva may be pardoned for cynicism about US declarations of good faith. The Nevada test site will not be closed down. The nuclear laboratories will continue at full tilt. The experiments will, for the time being, remain non-critical. But — as the White House explicitly stated on August 11, 1995 — if the president is advised by the secretaries of defense and energy that the "safety or reliability" of nuclear weapons in the arsenal can no longer be certified, he can consult Congress, invoke "supreme national interests", withdraw from the treaty forthwith, and commence nuclear testing once more.

As preparations for Rebound and Holog instruct us, the nuclear research labs will be more than ready, more than eager, when that hour comes. ■

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